



Research Article

An account of the kings of Kanu'l as recorded on the hieroglyphic stair of K'an II of Caracol

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Abstract

Many questions remain about the hieroglyphic stair dedicated in A.D. 642 by K'an II, the great king of Caracol. Constituent panels have been found at Caracol, Ucanal, Naranjo, and Xunantunich—archaeological sites spread between Guatemala and Belize. The most recently discovered Panels 3 and 4 at Xunantunich shed light on the tumultuous decades of the seventh century. Panel 4, which opened the hieroglyphic stair, makes a surprising statement from the outset, clarifying that Kanu'l political authority was irrevocably established at Calakmul. This bold statement serves as a synoptic précis for the entire narrative and explains why the deeds of K'an II are related, but only to the extent that these could be interwoven with the history of the Kanu'l. This makes the hieroglyphic stair such an important source, because it tracks the rulers of the Kanu'l dynasty from the vantage of a close ally. These monuments attest to the fissioning of the Kanu'l dynasty and its eventual restoration at Calakmul, from whence Classic Maya politics would be overseen for the remainder of the seventh century. In this article, we build on earlier studies and add our most recent observations and new readings based on renewed inspections of the existing panels.

Resumen

Muchas preguntas quedan sobre la escalinata jeroglífica dedicada en 642 d.C. por K'an II, el gran rey de Caracol. Paneles constituyentes fueron descubiertos distribuidos entre una serie de diferentes sitios arqueológicos, incluyendo a Caracol, Ucanal, Naranjo y Xunantunich, lugares distribuidos entre Guatemala y Belice. Los paneles descubiertos más recientemente en Xunantunich contribuyen en gran medida a nuestra comprensión de este fascinante monumento y las tumultuosas décadas de la dinastía Kanu'l. Gracias a los descubrimientos realizados en Xunantunich, se han cerrado muchas lagunas, con los Paneles 3 y 4 que se destacan como el principio y fin de esta gran narrativa. El Panel 4 de Xunantunich—que abrió la narrativa que adornó la escalinata jeroglífica—hace una declaración sorprendente desde el inicio, aclarando que la autoridad política se había establecido resueltamente en Calakmul. Esta es una declaración audaz y sirve como resumen sinóptico para todo el texto de la escalinata jeroglífica, preparando el escenario y, por lo tanto, explicando la atención prestada a los reyes Kanu'l en la narrativa. Como tal, los hechos de K'an II son relatados, pero solo en la medida en que estos puedan entretenerse con las acciones de los señores de Kanu'l. Esta es la razón por la cual la escalera jeroglífica es una fuente tan importante para los asuntos dinásticos de los reyes Kanu'l, ya que rastrea a los gobernantes de la dinastía desde la posición ventajosa de un aliado. Estos monumentos atestiguan de la fisión de la dinastía Kanu'l y su eventual restablecimiento en Calakmul, desde donde se controlaría gran parte de la política maya clásica durante el resto del siglo VII. En esta contribución nos basamos en estudios anteriores y agregamos observaciones recientes y nuestras nuevas lecturas, realizadas a través de la inspección renovada de los paneles existentes.

Keywords: Caracol; hieroglyphic stair; K'an II; Kanu'l dynasty

Introduction

Two imposing hieroglyphic panels have recently been discovered at the archaeological site of Xunantunich in Belize (Helmke and Awe 2016a, 2016b). These panels were as bookends to a hieroglyphic stair known from the site of Naranjo in Guatemala, with smaller sections also found at

the sites of Ucanal and Caracol (see Martin 2017; Tokovinine 2007). With this discovery, much of the monument has again been examined, the various parts of the texts have been rearticulated, and the most salient voids have been identified. Through continued work and scrutiny, the two authors have made additional observations that have a bearing on a more complete understanding of the text. We have redocumented each of the extant fragments and have produced new drawings of all parts of the stair, including those presented below. These have a bearing on our epigraphic observations and have enabled us to suggest

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Cite this article: Helmke, Christophe, and Sergei Vepretskii (2024) An account of the kings of Kanu'l as recorded on the hieroglyphic stair of K'an II of Caracol. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 35, 748–765. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536122000219>

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a revised chronology that extends the timeline of events recorded and highlights the role of the ballgame and necrological themes as narrative framing devices. We have also been able to confirm that most historical events recorded on the stair have duplicate references on other monuments raised at Caracol during the seventh century A.D. Our new interpretations and readings are presented here as a chronological examination of key segments of the text, but before this, we present a background, an overview of the narrative structure, general themes, and major actors of this fascinating historical account to better situate our findings.

Background

On December 7 in A.D. 642, the king officiated the rituals surrounding the important calendrical celebrations. The commemoration of this date took place on what is known as a Period Ending (PE), and it corresponds to the date of 9.10.10.0.0 in the Maya Long Count calendar. Owing to difficulties in reading his regnal name, the king in question is now only known as K'an II—a nickname attributed to this monarch by recent scholarship (Houston 1987:91–92; Stone et al. 1985:271–274).

It is on this date that K'an II dedicated the imposing hieroglyphic stair that committed to stone a retrospective of his reign. K'an II was the great king of Caracol, an important capital located in what is now Belize. The reign of this king lasted from A.D. 618 to 658 and ushered in a period of prosperity and stability for the capital and its dynasty (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996; D. Chase and A. Chase 2017; Martin and Grube 2000:91–92). This king maintained close ties to the kings of the Kanu'l dynasty, and it is this connection that is emphasized throughout the text of the hieroglyphic stair. Little is known of his immediate predecessors, but their interactions with the Kanu'l suggest a close relation, although the precise nature of these associations remains unclear.

In fact, whereas the accession of K'an II in 618, which was thought to be overseen by the triadic tutelary deities of Caracol, he underwent another investiture the following year, under the auspices of the Kanu'l king *Yuhkno'm Ti' Chan* (Simon Martin, personal communication 2005; Martin 2009). The accession of the successor of the Kanu'l dynasty, *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'*, is also recorded in 622, as is the receipt of a gift, possibly a deity effigy or headdress, from the same king just seven months later (Grube and Martin 2004:70–71; Martin and Grube 2000:92). The reiteration of these diplomatic ties was closely followed by offensive actions against the city of Naranjo in both 626 and 631. More morbid themes close the narrative, with the passing of the mother of K'an II in 638, and, finally, the death of the Kanu'l king *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*¹ in 640, echoing the necrology of *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'* a decade earlier (Helmke and Awe 2016a:8).

We read of clear reversals of fortune, with a decisive attack in 680, during which Caracol suffered a major loss at the hands of Naranjo—in retaliation for earlier martial actions against Naranjo (Grube and Martin 2004:107–108; Martin and Grube 2000:95). It is probably as part of this

attack that monuments at Caracol were splintered and obliterated—including Stela 3, also raised by K'an II—and most of his hieroglyphic stair was dismantled and carried off by the victors (Helmke and Awe 2018; Martin 2000:57–58, Figure 12). The largest portion of risers that once composed the hieroglyphic stair found their way to Naranjo, and they have since been designated as “steps” (see Graham 1978:107; Maler 1908:91–93). Interestingly one has also been found at Ucanal, and now two such panels have been discovered at the site of Xunantunich. Finally, one smaller fragment of a matching riser has also been discovered at Caracol.

The modern rediscovery of these monuments began with the explorations of Teobert Maler (1908), who found many of the panels at Naranjo in 1905 (see also Tokovinine 2007; Figure 1a). It was not until 1972 that Ian Graham located the Ucanal riser, secondarily placed in the alleyway of the site's ballcourt (Graham 1980:154; Figure 1b). The placement within the ballcourt is not altogether coincidental, as we will touch on again below. It would be another two decades before Arlen and Diane Chase found the small fragment at Caracol, in the rubble of Structure B5—a pyramidal structure that defines the southern part of the site's largest plaza (i.e., Plaza B; Figure 1c). At the time, this fragment was identified as part of the side of a stela (Grube 1994:113, Figure 9.14a), but years later it was identified as a fragment of the hieroglyphic stair (Helmke and Awe 2016a:3, Figure 3b; Martin 2017:Figure 1). It was not until the summer of 2016 that the two larger panels were discovered at Xunantunich by Jaime Awe and his team (Helmke and Awe 2016a, 2016b; Figure 1d). Despite the distance between these sites, the many similarities, shared metrics, and paleographic integrity of these monuments make it clear that these were part and parcel of the larger hieroglyphic stair dedicated by K'an II.

Narrative structure and themes

Although some queries remain concerning the beautiful monument of K'an II, the panels discovered at Xunantunich make significant contributions to our understanding of the tumultuous decades of the Kanu'l dynasty, shedding light on the pivotal role that they played in the affairs of Caracol and Maya politics generally. Panel 4, which opened the entire narrative that once graced the hieroglyphic stair, makes a surprising statement right from the outset, clarifying that political authority had once and for all been established at Calakmul. This is a bold statement and appears as a type of synoptic précis for the entire hieroglyphic stair, perhaps setting the stage for and thereby explaining the amount of attention lavished on the Kanu'l kings, and articulating how it came to be that power shifted from the earlier capital at Dzibanche to the new capital of Calakmul. Consequently, the deeds of K'an II are recounted, but only to the extent that these could be interwoven with the actions of the Kanu'l kings. This is why the hieroglyphic stair is such an important source, given that it tracks the rulers of the Kanu'l dynasty from the vantage point of an ally waiting with bated breath to see who would prevail in the final hours. Thanks to the recent discoveries made at Xunantunich, many gaps have now been



(a)



0 20 cm

(b)



0 10 cm

(c)



(d)

Figure 1. The widely distributed hieroglyphic stair of K'an II: (a) part of the steps as found at Naranjo in 1905 (photograph by Teobert Maler, after Maler 1908:Plate 24); (b) panel found in the playing alley of the ballcourt at Ucanal in 1972 (photograph courtesy of the Atlas Epigráfico de Petén); (c) fragment found at Caracol during excavations of Str. B5 (photograph by Helmke, courtesy of the Caracol Archaeological Project); and (d) Panel 3 found in 2016 at Xunantunich (photograph by Helmke, courtesy of the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project).

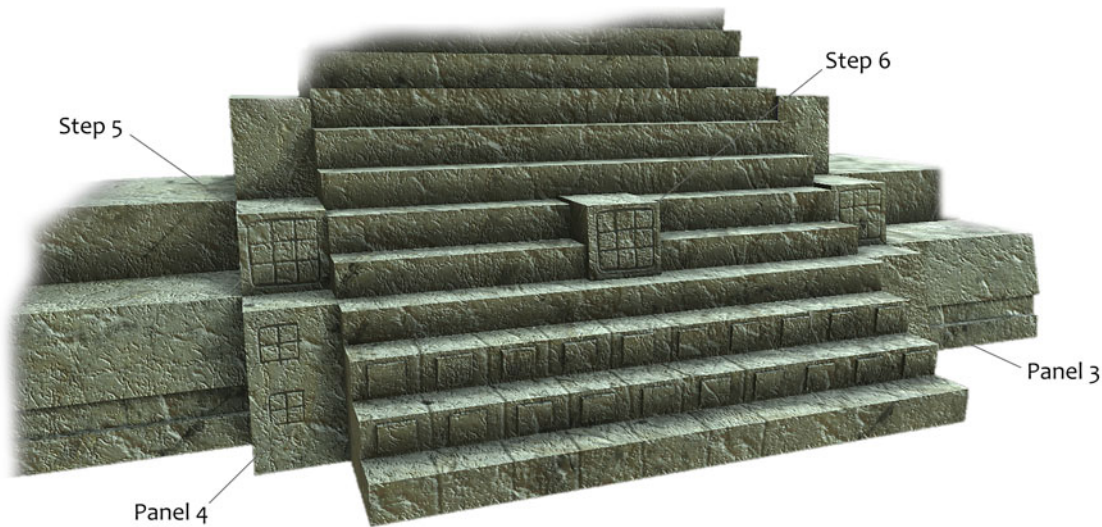


Figure 2. Hypothetical reconstruction of the hieroglyphic stair (isometric 3D model courtesy of Dorota Bojkowska and Piotr Kołodziejczyk).

closed, with Panels 3 and 4 as assenting bookends of this grand narrative. These monuments bear witness to the fissioning of the Kanu'l dynasty and its eventual re-establishment at Calakmul, where it would go on to control much of Classic Maya politics for the remainder of the seventh century.

Thanks to the discovery of Panels 3 and 4 at Xunantunich, we now have both the very opening and closing sections of the narrative recorded on the hieroglyphic stair. As large rectangular slabs that would have fronted the lateral stair-side outsets, these panels are considerably larger than most of the companion pieces. These panels include two large circular medallions, divided into four glyph blocks. Each of these larger panels were apparently surmounted on the upper terrace by rectangular slabs divided into six glyph blocks arranged in three columns over two rows (Figure 2). The remainder represent risers (designated as “steps”) for imposing megalithic steps, and each riser exhibits a single medallion, again containing four glyph blocks.

Chronology and narrative structure

Both Panels 3 and 4 found at Xunantunich make mention of the Period Ending of 9.10.10.0.0 (642), which confirms the long-suspected dedicatory date of the monument (see Closs 1984:78, Table 1; Graham 1978:111; Morley 1909:550–554; Proskouriakoff 1993:40–41). The salient Period Ending (PE) of a decade earlier—that is, 9.10.0.0.0 (623)—is also recorded on Step 6. The earliest calendrical record identified on the hieroglyphic stair is the partial Calendar Round (CR) date preserved on Step 8, which records the 9 K'an 2 Sek attack on Naranjo. This date corresponds to 9.9.13.4.4 (626) in the Long Count and is preceded by a partial Distance Number (DN) whose last coefficient can be reconstructed as three “years” (i.e., “vague years” of 360 days). Assuming that the DN also involved non-naught coefficients for the day and “month,” the nearest date is the 9.9.10.0.0 PE. As a result, it was assumed that this was the start of the narrative (Helmke and Awe 2016a, 2016b:10).

In light of this reconstruction, the full narrative was therefore thought to provide a retrospective of the reign of K'an II, spanning from the dedicatory date in A.D. 642, coinciding with the PE of 9.10.10.0.0, looking back to the corresponding 9.9.10.0.0 PE two decades earlier. These temporal parameters would symmetrically frame the important 9.10.0.0.0 PE (633), which, aptly enough, appeared to be recorded near the middle of the narrative. The identification of this narrative midpoint rests on the sequence of events occurring before and after this median date (see Helmke and Awe 2016b:Table 2). It was also noted that the median PE of A.D. 633 was recorded on the rectangular Step 6, which was thought to mark the middle of the hieroglyphic stair. Based on this hypothetical reconstruction of the stair as a whole, we assumed that the stair might involve an axial stair block, which would have been faced by Step 6, with the corresponding rectangular panel above Panel 3, assumed to be still missing (Figure 2).

In these reconstructions, the entire narrative would have been symmetrically disposed not only in terms of the placement of the panels—with narrative time spanning a katun (i.e., two decades) and near-equal decades recorded on either side of an axial stair block—but also with the bookend monuments both stating the final dedicatory date. This disposition would thereby imbue the text with a circularity, closing where it had begun, at the narrative hook at the onset.

In spite of this neat model, we now have an alternate reconstruction of the hieroglyphic stair, which is based largely on the intercalation of the extant blocks and the realization that events predating the A.D. 623 PE were also recorded on the hieroglyphic stair. In this revision, many of the events recorded on the hieroglyphic stair duplicate those found on the other known monuments of K'an II. Each duplicate reflects what were deemed to be the most significant deeds and achievements of his reign, as measured against key turning points in the Kanu'l dynasty (Table 1).

Table 1. Revised chronological summary of the narrative preserved in the panels that together comprise the hieroglyphic stair discovered at Naranjo, Ucanal, and Xunantunich (using the 584286 GMT + 1 correlation coefficient; see also Helmke and Awe 2016b:Table 2)^{1, 2}

Long Count / DN	Day	Month	Gregorian Date	Monument
9.10.10.0.0	13 Ajaw	8 K'ank'in	7 December A.D. 642	NAR Step 5 & XUN Panel 4
-1.5.1.18				Mon. ?
9.9.4.16.2	10 Ik'	0 Pop	9 March A.D. 618	NAR Step 2
+4.12.3				Mon. ?
9.9.9.10.5	3 Chikchan	3 Kej	17 October A.D. 622	? & NAR Step 4
14.7.10				NAR Step 4
9.8.15.2.11	9 Chuwen	19 Yaxk'in	28 July A.D. 608	Mon. ?
+7.15				Mon. ?
9.9.10.0.0	2 Ajaw	13 Pop	21 March A.D. 623	Mon. ?
+3.4.4				NAR Step 8
9.9.13.4.4	9 K'an	2 Sek	29 May A.D. 626	NAR Step 8
+4.0				Mon. ?
9.9.13.8.4	11 K'an	2 Ch'en	17 August A.D. 626	Mon. ?
+13.1				NAR Step 7
9.9.14.3.5	12 Chikchan	18 Sip	5 May A.D. 627	NAR Step 7
+3.8.9				UCN Step 13 & ?
9.9.17.11.14	13 Hix	12 Sak	5 October A.D. 630	UCN Step 13
+1.4.9				NAR Step 6
9.9.18.16.3	7 Ak'bal	16 Muwan	28 December A.D. 631	NAR Step 6
+1.1.17				NAR Step 6
9.10.0.0.0	1 Ajaw	8 K'ayab	28 January A.D. 633	NAR Step 6 & ?
9.10.3.2.12	2 Eb	0 Pop	5 March A.D. 636	NAR Step 1
+1.13.10				NAR Step 10
9.10.4.16.2	8 Ik'	5 K'ank'in	25 November A.D. 637	NAR Step 10
+14.2				NAR Step 10 & ?
9.10.5.12.4	4 K'an	2 Yax	3 September A.D. 638	Mon. ?
+1.0				Mon. ?
9.10.5.13.4	11 K'an	2 Sak	23 September A.D. 638	XUN Panel 3
+1.14.13				XUN Panel 3
9.10.7.9.17	1 Kaban	5 Yaxk'in	7 July A.D. 640	XUN Panel 3
+2.8.3				XUN Panel 3
9.10.10.0.0	13 Ajaw	18 K'ank'in	7 December A.D. 642	[Date Implied]

¹Portions in gray have not been recovered and are conjectural.²Note that the panel from Ucanal is also designated as Step 13 (see Graham 1978:110).

Some actors

First, the increasing martial encounters between Caracol and Naranjo during this period also affected the kings of these capitals. It is partly as a consequence of these attacks that the local record is disrupted to such an extent that contemporary rulers, such as *K'uxaj Sak Chuwe'n* (reign

circa [r. ca.] A.D. <630–631+) and *K'ahk' Xiiw Chan Chaahk*² (r. ca. <640–680+) are as poorly known as they are.

Second, these years saw the rapid succession of a series of short-reigning Kanu'l kings, in the wake of the long and stable reign of Scroll Serpent (Figure 3). Consequently, *Yuhkno'm Ti' Chan*, who is known from a fleeting reference in A.D. 619 and from an inscribed jade found at Holmul

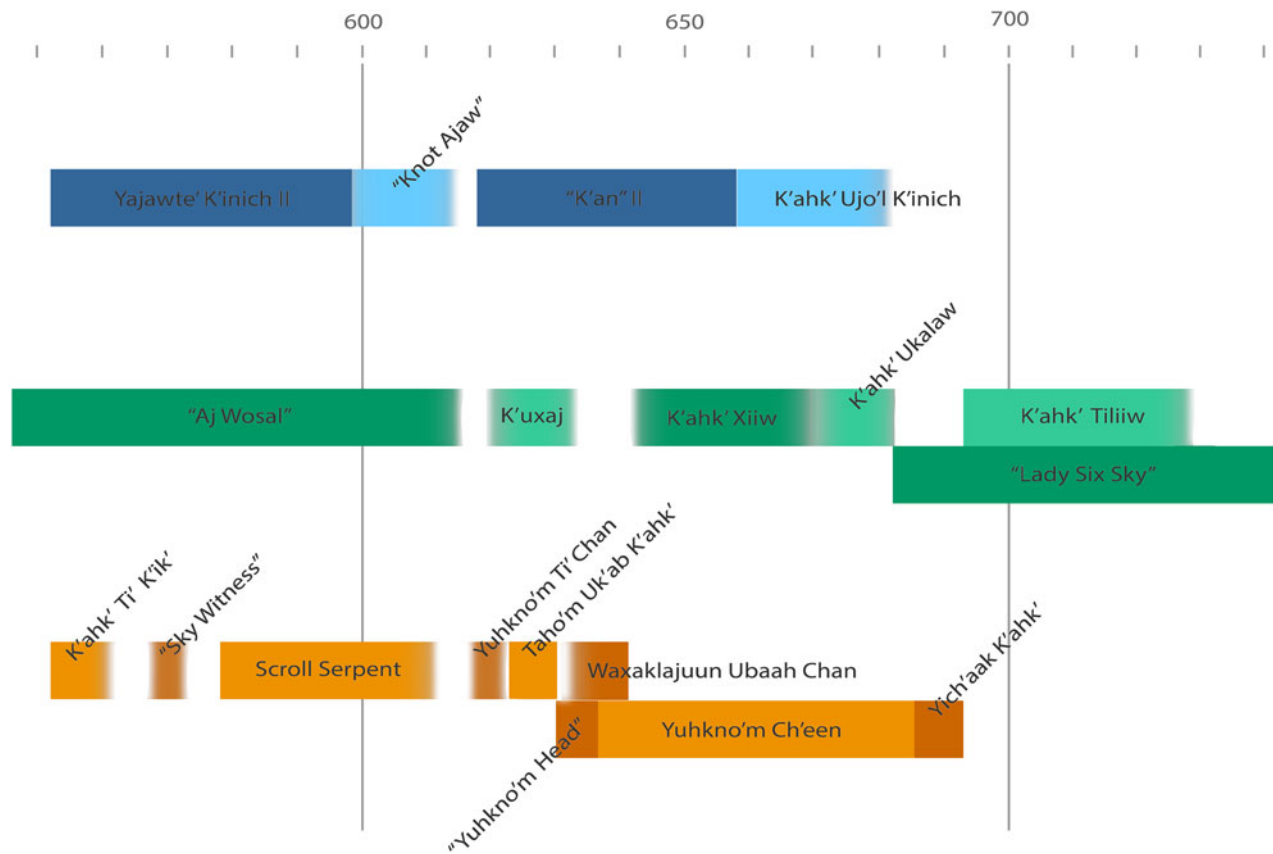


Figure 3. An overview of the most salient reigns and actors during the seventh century at Caracol, at Naranjo, and of the Kanu'l dynasty (chart by Helmke).

(Estrada-Belli 2017:16–17), was followed by *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'*, who reigned from A.D. 622 until 630 (Martin and Grube 2000:106). He appears to have been followed by *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*, probably from around A.D. 630 until his untimely death in 640 (Helmke and Awe 2016a:9–11). Concurrently, we read of *Yuhkno'm Head*, who was active from around 630, with *Yuhkno'm Ch'een* II acceding formally to power in A.D. 636 (Martin 2017:9; Martin and Grube 2000:108–109). The latter two names may in fact make reference to the same individual, with the earlier serving as a preaccession name, and the later as the formal regnal name (Helmke and Awe 2016b:18–19; Martin 2005:7, n9, 2017). The accession of *Yuhkno'm Ch'een* in April of A.D. 636 follows the defeat of *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan* by a mere month, and this may have been the catalyst for the sudden elevation of the antiking.³ With the death of *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan* just four years later, the schism in the royal house appears to have abated, and we see *Yuhkno'm Ch'een* established at his new capital, Calakmul, for the remainder of his long and prosperous reign. With this establishment, a new dynastic line—of which *Yuhkno'm Ch'een* was considered the first ruler—was founded, along with a commensurate dynastic count (see Helmke and Awe 2016b:17–19).

Remaining gaps

In a more cautious assessment, it was originally noted that there were lingering gaps in the narrative, given the many

blocks that remain to be discovered. On that basis, it was remarked that there were gaps at the beginning of the narrative—between at least A.D. 627 and 630, and once again between A.D. 637 and 638 (Helmke and Awe 2016b:10, Table 2). A revision of the texts from the reign of *K'an* II reveals extensive repetitions of events cited on contemporary monuments, especially Stela 3, the lengthy Stela 22, and the stucco texts of Structure B16. Together, these confirm which events could have been referred to on the hieroglyphic stair, and their sequentiality allows us to close some of the apparent gaps. Because of this, we can now appreciate a much more complete chronological overview of the entire hieroglyphic stair (Table 1). The one potential gap that remains consists of the three years that separate the attack on *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan* in A.D. 636 (on Step 1) from the PE of A.D. 633 (on Step 6). However, given that no intervening events are known from the other monuments of *K'an* II, it is possible that the gap between Step 6 and Step 1 solely entailed a DN connecting these two events directly.

Narrative themes

In thematic terms, we can regard the text of the hieroglyphic stair from two vantages. In much the same way that the thematic concept relates to what readers appreciate about a text, the thematic statement relates a great deal about a particular subject. Consequently, on the face of it,

the hieroglyphic stair provides a retrospective of the reign of K'an II. And yet, given that so much background information is provided on the contemporaneous Kanu'l kings—their accessions, gifts, intercessions, and eventual deaths—the thematic statement is an incisive account of allies and dynastic splintering. Whereas some might reasonably conjecture that K'an II successfully backed the dynastic line that would eventually prevail, thereby giving rise to the historical record at hand, a more literal and verbatim appraisal instead reads as a rather sober and even-handed account of the Kanu'l monarchs and their affairs. Indeed, the text goes to some length to specify where the various Kanu'l lords operated so as to provide some clarity in what was evidently a tumultuous period. The tone of the account, nonetheless, is one of composure as if the storm had been weathered, and the times of unrest abaft.

Aside from royal accessions and a list of death statements that reads like a necrology, another salient motif is the ballgame. At first, it may seem surprising to note an athletic activity placed on the same level as the other royal dealings. Yet, in recent years, a closer reading of the texts associated with the Kanu'l kings reveals that they had a particular proclivity for the ballgame—not just as a physical activity. Evidently, for them, it was one imbued with complex symbolism and much pageantry (Freidel et al. 1993:337–386; Kowalski and Fash 1991; Miller and Houston 1987; Zender 2004). Therefore, on several occasions, the panels of the hieroglyphic stairs at La Corona show the local lords playing the ballgame against rulers of Kanu'l. Examples include the ballgame of *Yuhkno'm Ch'een* in 635, as recorded on the finely carved Elements 33 and 35 of La Corona (e.g., Martin 2017; Stuart 2012a; Stuart et al. 2014:437). This echoes the much earlier hieroglyphic stair of Dzibanche, which in addition to representing an array of humiliated captives as tangible expressions of victorious martial engagements, also displays ballgame scenes in a selection of figurative panels (see Nalda 2004:52). Plotting ballgame-related monuments temporally and spatially across the central Maya Lowlands has revealed that these occur at sites that are known to have participated in networks of allegiance with the Kanu'l dynasty (Helmke et al. 2015:21–25). As such, much like Classical cultures of the Mediterranean—where sports, spectacle, and gladiatorial combats were sponsored by the ruling elite and where individual athletes and combatants could be backed by royal patrons—the Kanu'l also maintained a type of athletic hegemony, in which alliances were fostered with vassals through the ballgame as ritualized contests (Helmke et al. 2015:8–12). The prestige associated with these contests must have been comparable with the jousts of the European Medieval period and also provided a beneficial outlet for aggression, especially for younger men trained to fight in a society shaped by the warrior ethos (Clephan 1995). Whereas success and aptitude were undoubtedly highly regarded, praised, and rewarded, mere participation in these competitions was of paramount importance to foster bonds between the combatants, each operating within an established code of conduct.

More specifically, references to the ballgame frame the entire narrative. Consequently, the very first event recorded

in the text is a ballgame event in A.D. 642, which took place commemoratively as part of the dedication of the whole hieroglyphic stair, as recorded on Steps 12 and 11 (Figures 4a and 4b). In that segment, the text records a subclause that is highlighted and emphasized by a so-called focus marker, functioning as a type of demonstrative that initiates a clause: *alay ipitz [ti] a[h]ku[l] ... tuun uk'aba' ye[h]bul* (“thus/here, and the ballgame was played, at the turtle ... stone, it is the name of his stair”). The final segment provides the proper name of the hieroglyphic stair (possibly as a couplet),⁴ and apparently the ballgame in question involved striking and rebounding the ball against this very stair, in partial emulation of an actual ballcourt. This is one variant of the ballgame, in which there are not two teams returning the ball to each other in a formal ballcourt, but in which the ruler, dressed in full attire, bounced a large ball against a broad stairway (see Coe 2003:200–202; Miller and Houston 1987). We surmise that this is the same type of event cited here, given the self-referential nature of the text recorded on this hieroglyphic stair.

In addition to initiating the whole account, the same event is reiterated at the very end of the text in the last medallion of Panel 3, forming the symmetrical culmination of the text, as it were (Figure 4c). In that instance, we first read of the passing of the mother of K'an II in September A.D. 638, followed by the death of the snake king *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*, in July A.D. 640. Rather than a natural death, the demise of this king is specified as *ti yehtuun*—either “by the edge of the knife: (Helmke and Awe 2016a:9–10), or “at the edge of the stone” (Martin 2017). In either case, it describes what may be an act of regicide. After these death records, the ballgame is cited simply as *ipitzij* (“and it was played ball”), providing the very last utterance of the narrative.

Aside from these two framing references, another important mention is made to a ballgame that was held on the date 12 Chikchan 18 Sip, or May 627 (on Step 7). This date is also known from Stela 3 and the stucco texts of Str. B16 at Caracol, where it records the defeat of a subsidiary center that may have been named *Tzam* (Grube 1994:102–103; Grube and Martin 2004:32). Yet, on Step 7, we read of another event involving the Kanu'l king *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'* (r. A.D. 622–630)—quite possibly the predecessor of *Yuhkno'm Head* (Figure 4d). On the hieroglyphic stair, the event is recorded as *pitzij [ti] uxahal e[h]bu[l]*, or “played ball at the three-conquest stair,” providing the name of the ballcourt where the game transpired (Bíró 2013:18–19; Martin and Grube 2000:130). This name is that of a legendary ballcourt where the Maize God was decapitated in the distant past, but it was also a name attributed to historical ballcourts at a series of different sites across the lowlands, as material emulations of the mythic precedent (Freidel et al. 1993:353–355). Consequently, any ballgames played within such courts were, in essence, replications of mythic events that transpired in the time before the present creation.

The precise juxtaposition of events, involving a ballgame on the one hand and the toppling of a subsidiary locality on the other, has been recognized and suggests a direct causal

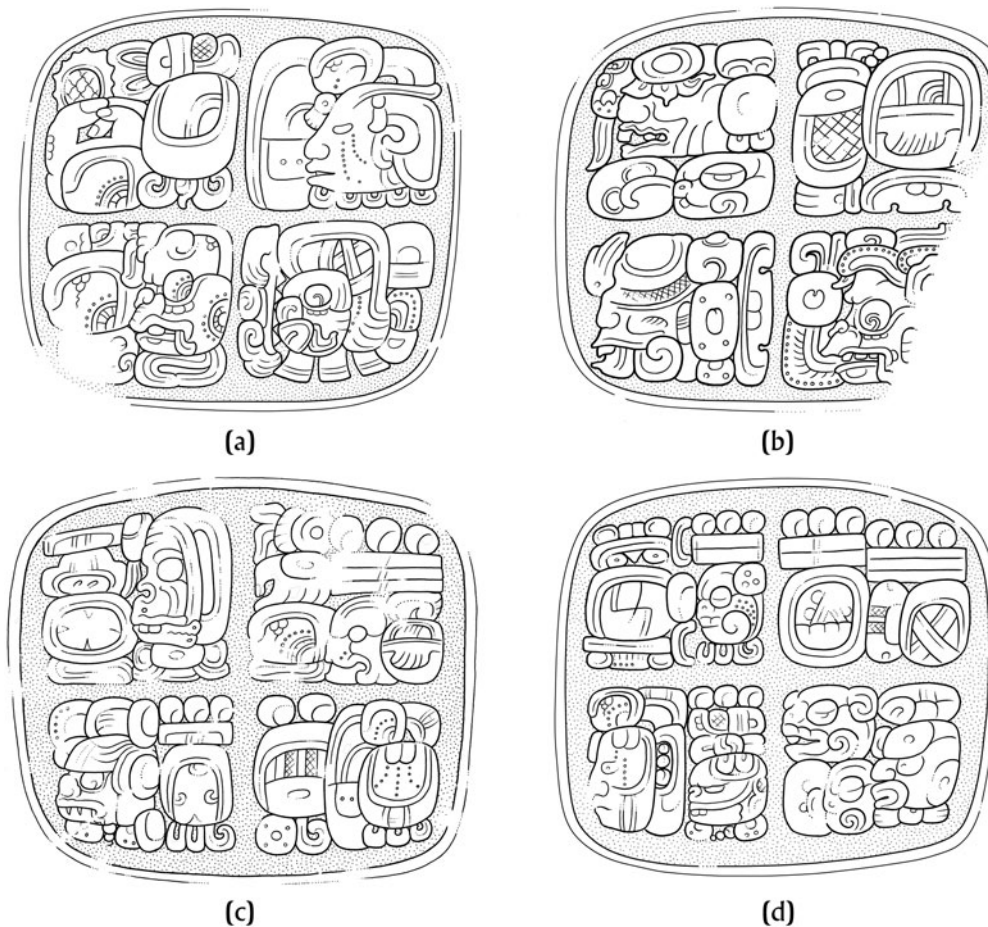


Figure 4. Textual excerpts of the hieroglyphic stair of K'an II relating to the ballgame: (a) Step 12; (b) Step 11; (c) Lower medallion of Xunantunich Panel 3; and (d) Step 7 (drawings by Helmke).

relation (Schele and Freidel 1990:176–177). Although the specifics remain unknown, these examples demonstrate the intimate relationship between the ballgame events and the athletic hegemony of the Kanu'l lords and even the role of the ballgame in connection with the dedication of the very hieroglyphic stair that bears this historical record. Consequently, although it may not be altogether apparent at the outset, the ballgame is one of the dominant narrative themes of the hieroglyphic stair.

New interpretations and readings

As background information, we have presented the narrative structure, major actors, and salient themes of the hieroglyphic stair. With this framework in place, we can now delve more deeply into the text and present our most recent interpretations and readings of this critically important historical source. Not only do these observations contribute to our understanding of the dynastic history of Caracol but the monument itself serves as a testimony of contemporaries in the central lowlands. The hieroglyphic stair of K'an II opens a window onto this history that spans at least A.D. 618 to 642—from the accession of K'an II to the monument's own dedication. During these decades, the Kanu'l dynasty

underwent tumultuous years, and it is precisely for this reason that the hieroglyphic stair provides such a vivid and detailed account. Below, we provide our new observations of key passages and major events, according to the chronological sequence of the hieroglyphic stair.

618 (Step 2)

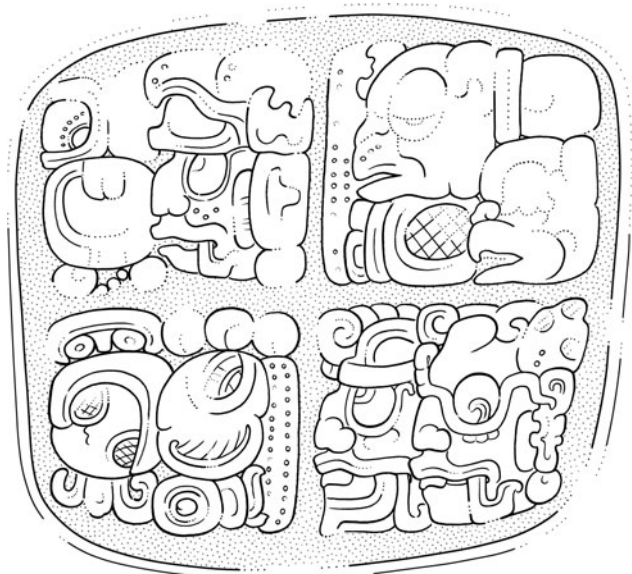
Rather than merely summarizing and accounting for all major events that transpired over the course of the katun that separates the PE of 9.9.10.0.0 and 9.10.10.0.0 as has been heretofore assumed (Helmke and Awe 2016a, 2016b), the narrative in fact reaches farther back in time. One key piece of evidence to this effect is the partial clause recorded on Step 2. This records an event for which K'an II is named as subject (C1-D1), but the verb in question was recorded on another—now missing—riser. This action is attributed, via an expression of agency (*uchabjiij* at C2a), to the triadic tutelary deities of Caracol. An honorific term of address follows the agency expression (C2b) and precedes the string of theonyms, of which only the first two deities remain named at present. The two remaining profiles appear to depict the Patron of Pax, also known as *Sibikte'*, and the Jaguar God of the Underworld, *Chuwaaj* (see Helmke 2013:10–12; Lopes

2003). In other references to these tutelary deities, a feline (*Hix*) and a raptorial bird (*Tz'ikiin*) are named in addition to a particular aspect of the Jaguar God of the Underworld (compare to the references seen of Stelae 14 [B8-D6] and 16 [B13-A16]). Regardless, the phrasing preserved on Step 2 duplicates that seen on Stelae 3 (C3-D6) and 22 (D12-F1) in the clauses that record the first accession of K'an II in March A.D. 618 (Figure 5). As such, the same event was probably recorded in this segment of the hieroglyphic stair, and we can thereby presume that this was one of the initial events referred to at the start of the narrative. This then pushes the time-depth of the narrative by at least five years. The reference to the initial accession of K'an II in the text of the hieroglyphic stair makes all the more sense given the katun—or two-decade jubilee—in November A.D. 637, recorded on Step 10. Without this initial anchor, the jubilee record would have been without prior referent in the text.

622 (Step 4)

As preserved, the primary clause on Step 4 ends on *Uxwitza'* (“three mountain place”), the ancient toponym of Caracol. This is followed by a subclause, headed by a possessive construction that is read *yak'aw*—“it is the gift of,” which is tied to *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'*—styled with a complete emblem glyph as *K'uhul kanu'l ajaw*, or “godly Kanu'l king” (Figure 6a). Consequently, whatever the main thrust of the primary clause that preceded this segment was, it had to do with a gift that had been imparted by the Kanu'l king. The same segment is known from both the texts of Stela 3 (D10b-D14a) and Stela 22 (F13-H2) (Figures 6b and 6c). On both monuments, the event is associated with the CR 3 Chikchan 3 Kej, or October 17, 622, and the same date undoubtedly headed the primary clause on the hieroglyphic stair as well. On the stelae, the event is related in precisely the same fashion: *huli ux-T1036 tahn ch'een uxwitza'*, or “it arrived, the three ..., to the middle of the city of *Uxwitza'*.” That which arrived is named with a T1036 logogram, which represents the head of a raptorial bird with the logogram *winiik* (“man, person”) in its beak (see Thompson 1962:458), preceded by the numeral 3. With respect to the graphic motivations behind the formation of this undeciphered logogram, it either represents a carnivorous bird that was thought to consume humans, or alternatively, a type of avian figure that contains a human in its maw.⁵ In the former case, we can remark that the same glyph is used to refer to one of the three tutelary deities of Caracol, as named, for instance, in the text on Stelae 3 (C6a) and 16 (A14). The latter interpretation brings to mind the large figurative headdresses known from Palenque, which when worn, gave the king the appearance of emerging out of the gaping mouth of a large supernatural bird (see Stuart 2000, 2005:21–23). From extant representations, we can see that these were considerably larger than the more typical headdresses, and they required the help of several attendants to assist the king in shouldering the weight (Stuart 2005:45–52; see also Halperin et al. 2018).

Likewise, the text of Panel 7 at Dos Pilas—that recounts the accession of *Yich'aak K'ahk'* in A.D. 686, which *Bajlaj*



(a)



(b)

Figure 5. Records of the first accession of K'an II: (a) Step 2 (drawing by Helmke); and (b) Stela 3 (drawing by Vepretskii).

Chan K'awiil, the king of Dos Pilas, attended—describes that the accession of the Kanu'l king took place *ti-T1036-HUN* or *ti ... huun* (“with the aviform headdress”) (Figure 7a). Most significant of all, perhaps, is the final segment of

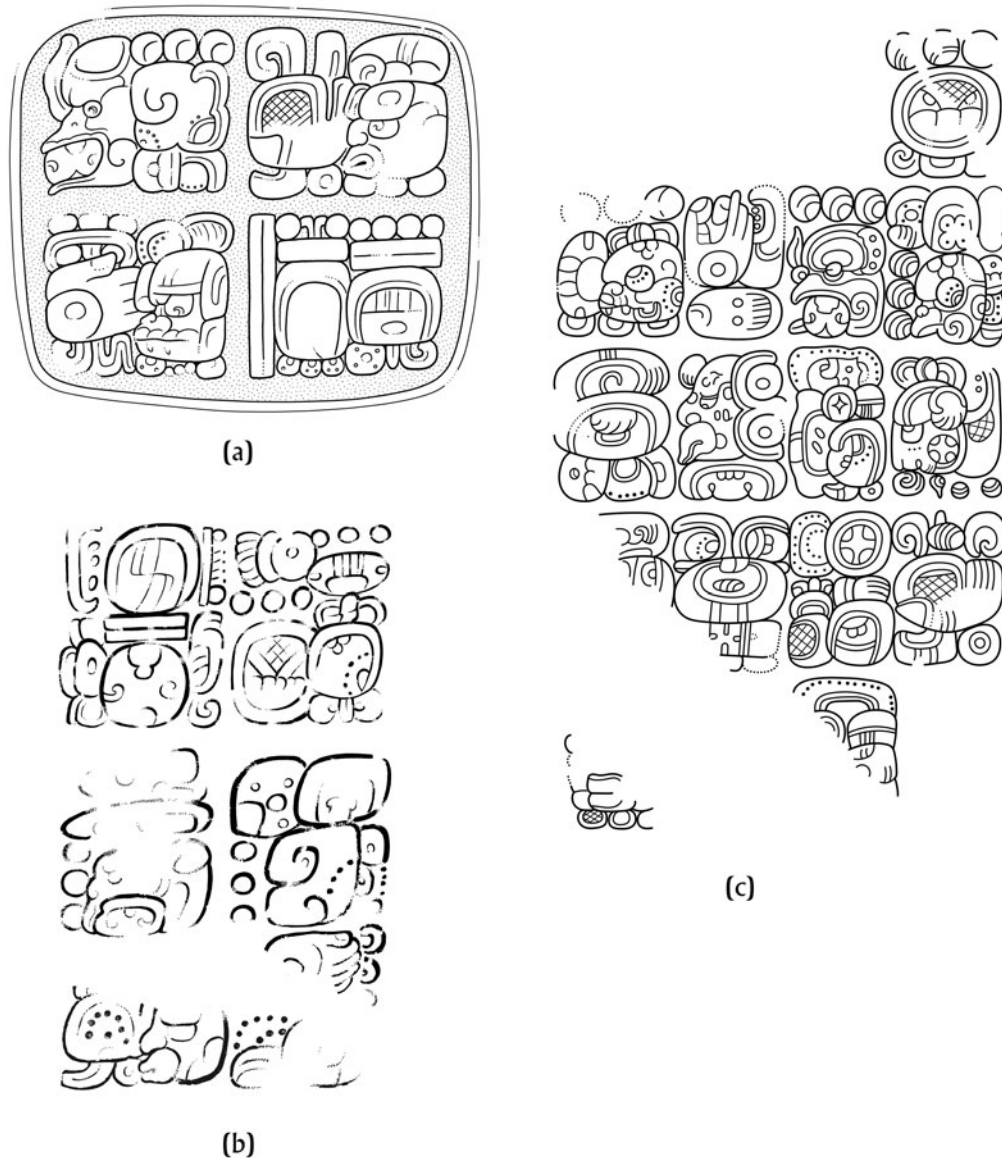


Figure 6. References to the arrival of a gift from *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'*: (a) Step 4; (b) Stela 22 (drawings by Helmke); and (c) Stela 3 (drawing by Vepretskii).

text on the back of Tikal Stela 31, which records the completion of the 9.0.0.0.0 PE in A.D. 435. This segment credits the Tikal monarch *Sihyaj Chan K'awiil* (r. A.D. 411–456) with the calendrical observances, and it notes that these took place *yitaj u-huun Ixuneh Bahlam* as well as *yitaj T1036 kalo'mte' Jatzo'm Kuy* (Figure 7b). These paired subclauses use the conjunctive expression *yitaj* (“with”) and dredge up names of prestigious forebears, including that of Lady *Uneh Bahlam* and the great Spearthrower Owl, in each case, relating these names to particular items that they possessed, or which are said to have been present—better understood as “worn” by *Sihyaj Chan K'awiil*—during the calendrical rituals. He is thereby said to wear the *huun*, which literally means “paper” but perhaps means “headband” (see Stuart 2012b) of Lady *Uneh Bahlam* and the T1036 of Spearthrower Owl. Significantly, on the front side of the monument, we see

none other than *Sihyaj Chan K'awiil* wearing selected regalia of his prestigious forebears, including a belt ornament naming Lady *Uneh Bahlam*, and holding aloft the headdress of Spearthrower Owl, his name couched in the middle of a prominent aviform headdress. For this reason, there can be little doubt that the T1036 logogram names that particular type of headdress, fashioned in the guise of the great celestial bird.

We can also note that at Caracol there is a preference for such aviform headdresses (involving the head of the great celestial bird), atop of which were stacked additional supernatural entities (see, for instance, Stelae 13, 16, and 20). Consequently, we surmise that 3-T1036 names a particular type of deity effigy or headdress in the form of one of Caracol's tutelary deities that was fashioned at the court of the *Kanu'l* and given to *K'an II* in A.D. 622 as a gift from

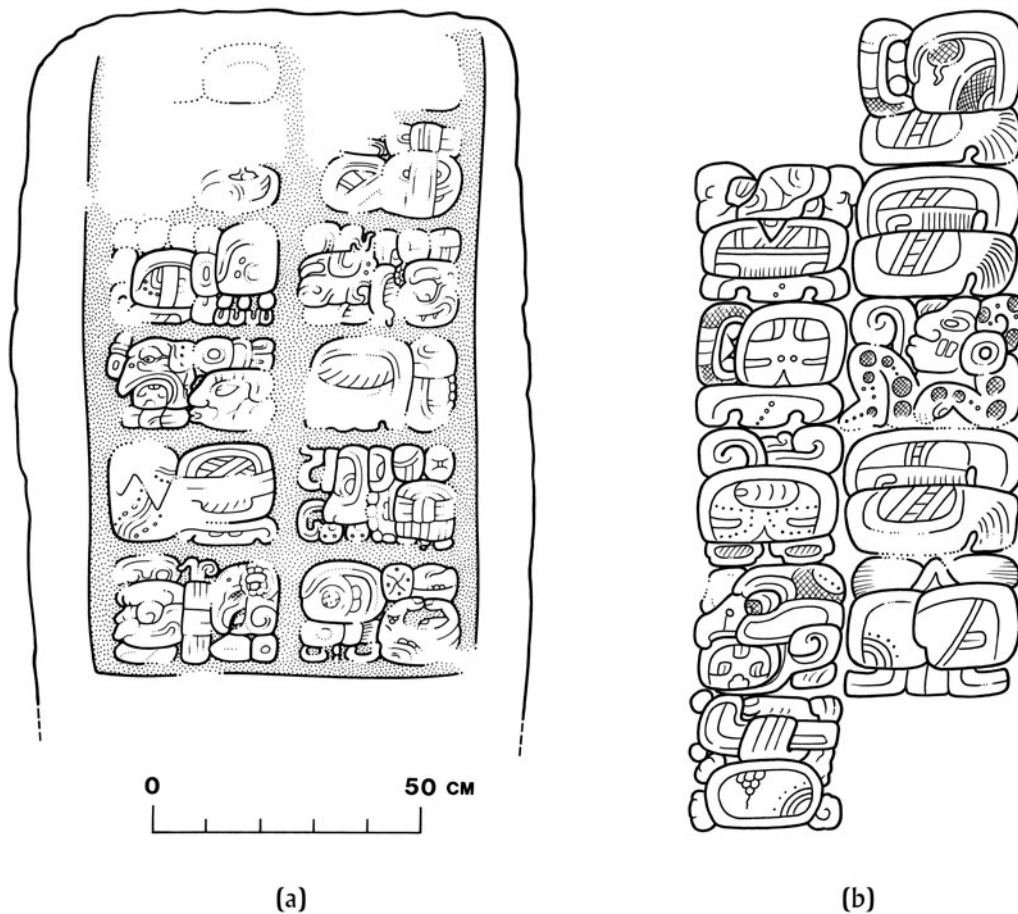


Figure 7. References to aviform headdresses at accessions: (a) Dos Pilas Panel 7 (drawing by and courtesy of Stephen Houston); and (b) segment of Tikal Stela 31 referring to the regalia of prominent ancestors, including the aviform headdress (drawing by Helmke).

the foreign king who had come to power just seven months before (e.g., Baron 2016:76). This gift affirmed the alliance between the two polities and served to maintain the bonds made with *Yuhkno'm Ti' Chan*, when he officiated the ensuing accession of K'an II in A.D. 619 (Martin and Grube 2000:92, 106). So important was this gift that its arrival to Caracol was recorded on all of the major public monuments raised by K'an II, including the hieroglyphic stair.

Interestingly, a distance number of 10 days, seven “months,” and 14 “years” follows the event in A.D. 622. Assuming that the narrative proceeds linearly, forward in time, this would place that other event in December 636. Yet, as preserved, we have conjoining segments on Steps 1 and 10, which together span dates from March 636 to November 637. Without any way of integrating the putative date, the temporal placement of Step 4 and its associated DN have remained unclear (Martin 2017:7). We note that in all other preserved instances in the texts of K'an II, DNs are typically preceded by a Distance Number Introductory Glyph (DNIG; see Thompson 1950:160–162), read *u-tz'ahk-a* (“it is set in order”) when narrative time counts forward in time. Because of this, the omission of the DNIG on Step 4 suggests that we are instead seeing a parenthetical reference to an event that took place earlier in time. With this

interpretation, the DN would lead to a date in July 608, during the reign of the predecessor of K'an II. Given the thematic continuities between these references, we can conclude that the earlier reference is to an event that involved the same object. Or, it could be a reference to a like-in-kind event, mentioning that the same type of event had already taken place 14 years earlier. If so, the segment on the hieroglyphic stair may have commemorated the arrival of a similar gift, from Scroll Serpent, the then reigning monarch of the Kanu'l.

In fact, a reference to Scroll Serpent is found in the text of Stela 4 at Caracol. Made of slate, this is one of the monuments that has extensively spalled, thereby making much of the text illegible (Figure 8). Nevertheless, the name of Scroll Serpent can be made out (at pDp2, Grube and Martin 2004:27). A redrawing of the remaining text, based on field photographs taken by Linton Satterthwaite, when the stela was discovered, reveals that the name of the Kanu'l king is preceded by an agency expression that heads the subclause. The end of the primary clause is closed by the same T1036 logogram discussed above. For this reason, we propose that the text on Stela 4 commemorates an event involving the same type of object, an action that was credited to Scroll Serpent.

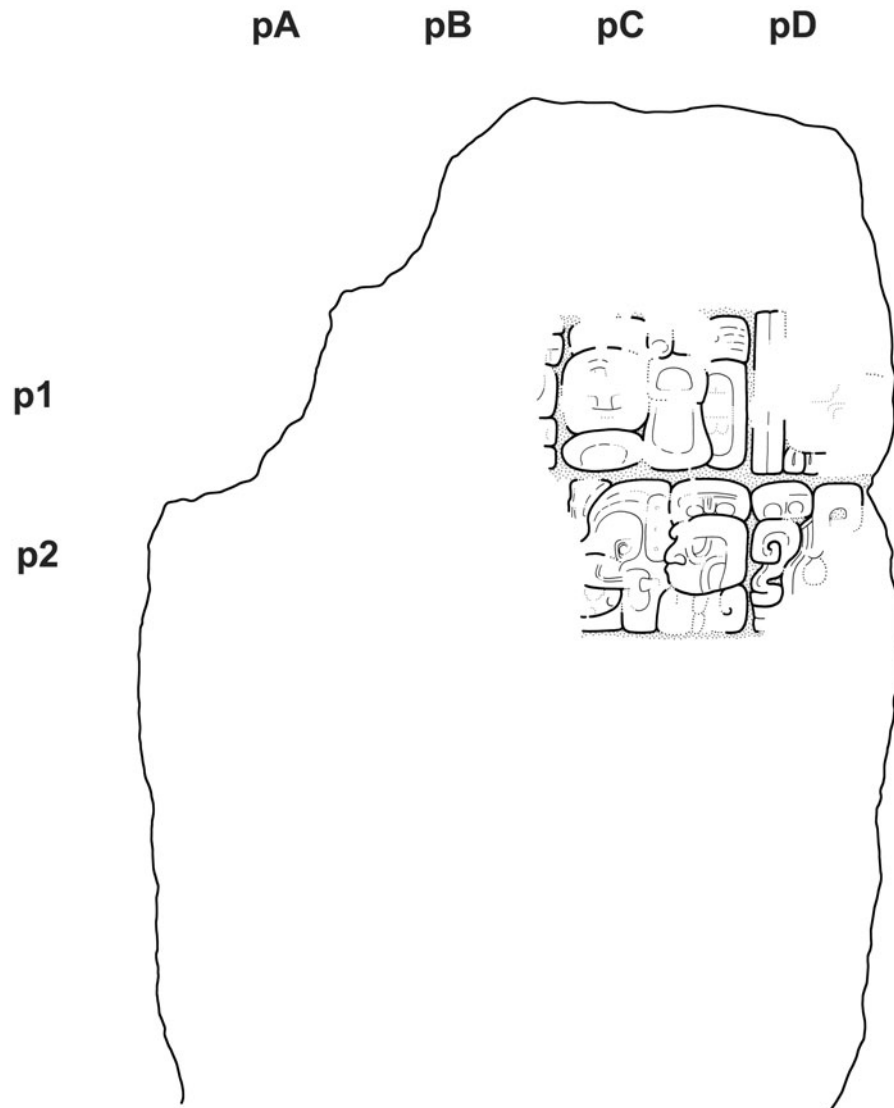


Figure 8. Redrawing of Caracol Stela 4 (drawing by Helmke).

Aside from this temporal side-step, the narrative then continues in chronological sequence. That the arrival of the gift of *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'* precedes the next event in chronological sequence is suggested by the partial distance number of three “years preserved on Step 8 (R1a), which leads to the LC date of 9.9.13.4.4. On the basis of these parameters, we can reconstruct the complete DN as 3.4.4 (Q1b-R1a). This reconstruction also allows us to close a gap in the narrative and to address the otherwise difficult placement of Step 4.

626 (Step 8)

The event recorded on this riser transpired on the partial date 9 K'an (Figure 9). This can be reconstructed as the CR 9 K'an 2 Sek, based in part on the parallel clause recorded on Stela 22 of Caracol (Grube 1994:88–89). This second instance may record an attack on Naranjo. On the stela, the event in question is rather eroded, but close inspections

of the monument—photographs under raking light and 3D models with polarized light—suggest that the clause in question may read *ochi uch'een ...*, *uchabij k'uhul sa'uul ajaw sak chuwe'n huk tzuk* (H10-G12a) (“entered the city of the [name of deity], it is the doing of the divine Naranjo king, the *Sak Chuwe'n* of the Seven Province”). This is followed by a subclause reading *jubuuy utook' upakal* (G12b-H11a) (“toppled were his flints, his shields”), a reference to the defeat of his army (employing the difrasismo, or poetic couplet, “flint” and “shield” to refer to the armed forces [Houston 1983]). Together these paint a rather vivid picture of a foreign legion invading the city of Naranjo, resulting in the defeat of her armed forces. The agent behind these martial actions is explicitly introduced by an agency expression as none other than K'an II (H12b-G13). Both Stela 22 and the clause of Step 8 involve the little-known Naranjo figure, who was referred to in the texts of Caracol in truncated fashion as *K'uxaj Sak Chuwe'n*. Whether this is the thirty-sixth Naranjo king or an important member of the royal family

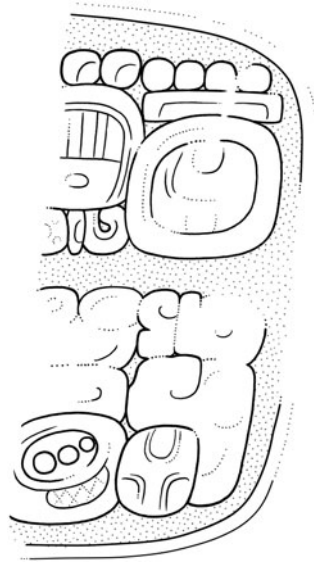


Figure 9. Step 8 (drawing by Helmke).

remains unknown at present. As has been remarked by Tokovinine (2007:Figure 5), precisely the same event and agent may be referred to in one of the more recently discovered texts of Naranjo. This is a fragmentary panel discovered within the central acropolis, the most opulent of the regal palaces at this capital. Assuming that this fragmentary panel was raised at Naranjo, under the auspices of a local king, this would testify to the importance of an event that transpired in May A.D. 626. This piece of evidence also suggests that the thirty-sixth king of Naranjo was already in power by that date.

630 (Step 13 / UCN Misc. 1)

The DN found at the start of the medallion on this step is solely preserved as **3-HAB-[bi]ya** and thereby occurs “three years” later than the preceding event (Figure 10). Given our current understanding of the text, the preceding event may be the ballgame event captained by *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'* in A.D. 627, as recorded on Step 7. This would place the event on Step 13 in A.D. 630 and record the death of the same Kanu'l king. These two events consequently emphasize two of the main themes of the text, once more focusing on the ballgame and on recording the death of the lords of Kanu'l. The passing of *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'* is possibly the first such death record on the hieroglyphic stair, and it initiates the necrological theme of the entire narrative.⁶ The segment of text recorded on the step rediscovered at Ucanal leads on to Step 6, found at Naranjo, given that the DN of one “year,” four “months” and nine days perfectly fits the time span between the two dates. That time lapse is preceded by a DNIG, which is written as **u-TZ'AK-a**, for *utz'ahka* (“it is set in order”); the logogram in this case is composed of complementary oppositions⁷ (see Stuart 2003).

Interestingly, before this temporal predicate, and following the regnal name of this Kanu'l monarch, there is

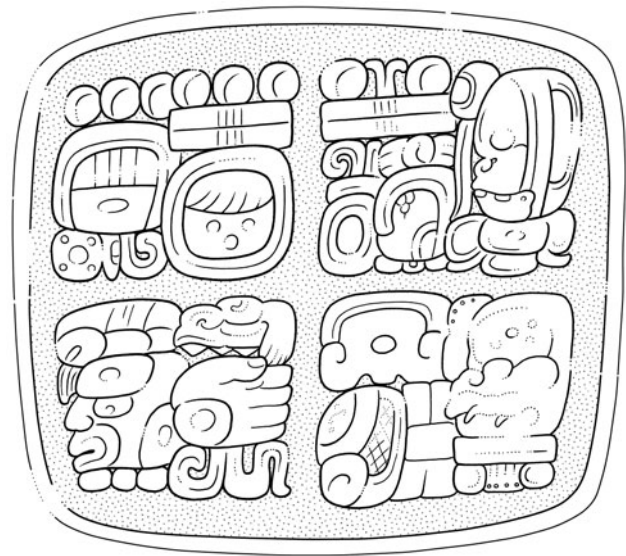


Figure 10. Step 13, found at Ucanal (drawing by Helmke).

another glyph block at the very end of the Ucanal step, which so far has escaped commentary. Unlike the *K'uhul Kanu'l Ajaw* emblem glyph with which he is styled on Step 4, he is not provided with a more common title. Instead, we see another epithet, rendered in a more complex construction, in which the last two glyphs appear to represent the head of a snake above a vocalic sign.⁸ Despite these difficulties, we have considered each element in turn and have transliterated it as **K'IK'-o-che-bi-a** (for the reading of the first sign, see Stuart 2005:76). The sequence **o-che-bi**, undoubtedly cues the expression *och-bih* (“to enter the road”), a metaphorical expression referring to the passing of rulers, based on analogy to the myth of the maize god's demise (Helmke and Kupprat 2016:47; Lounsbury 1974). But this is a more complex rendition of this expression given the spelling of the verb with **che** (instead of **chi**) and the use of **-a** in final position (or alternatively, **-aj**). As a result, the complete expression may have read *och-e[l]-bih-a*, involving object incorporation with an **-el** suffix to mark a participial construction, which is affixed by a suffix **-a** (marking the active voice of the transitive of non-CVC verbs). This is similar to the spelling found on K1004, where the demise of the maize god is spelled as **OCH-HA'-a**, in which the verbal suffix of the root intransitive is omitted (Helmke 2012:111). Together, these may be closely comparable to derived compound forms such as *k'al-huun-a*, used in conjunction for “accession” (< “crown-binding”) and *joch-k'ahk'-a*, for “stoking” (< “fire-drilling”) (see Lacadena 2003).⁹ Given that this construction is preceded by *k'ik'* (“blood”), we understand the entire expression literally as “blood passes away” and wonder whether this is a parenthetical metanarrative statement, in which the narrators comment on the death of *Taho'm Uk'ab K'ahk'* as being tantamount to the end of the bloodline. If this interpretation is correct, it may clarify why the events that followed would be as tumultuous as they were, with the accession of two indirect claimants to the throne vying

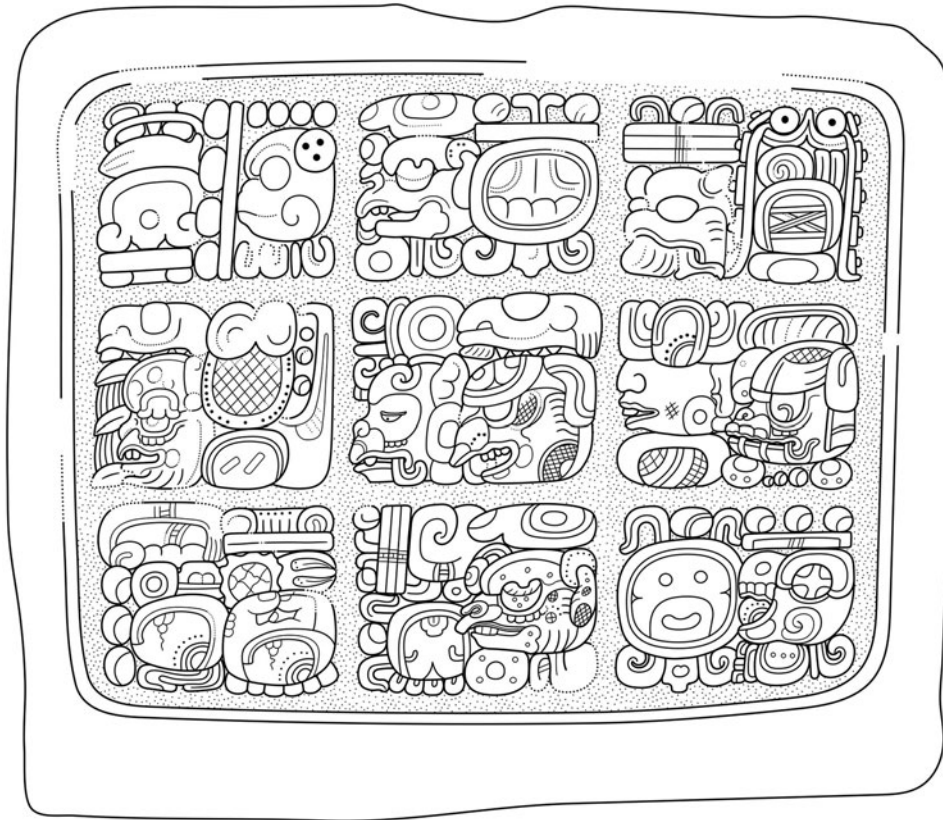


Figure 11. Step 6 (drawing by Vepretskii).

for supremacy—each drawn from more junior lines of the greater Kanu'l house.

631 (Step 6)

With the end of the segment on Step 13 leads directly over to the start of the text on the rectangular Step 6, which is presumed to have served as a facing panel to an axial out-set on the middle of the stair. The DN at the start leads to the CR 7 Ak'bal 16 Muwaan, an event in December A.D. 631 (Figure 11). The event in question has long been recognized as a crushing defeat of Naranjo, here written with the “Star War” verb, with *Sa'uul*, the main toponym of Naranjo, embedded within the verbal construction (see Riese 1984; Schele and Freidel 1990:176–177, Figure 5:7b). The defeat of the city is followed by a lengthier subclause that specifies the agent of the event.

Some years ago, this segment was the subject of a reanalysis by Tokovinine (2007:16–21), which brought added details into sharper focus. This reads *u-ch'een k'uxaj sak chuwe'n*, or “it is the city of *K'uxaj Sak Chuwe'n*,” specifying that the Star War verb affected the capital of the Naranjo king. This is then followed by an agency statement (*uchabij*) naming Yuhkno'm Head as the agent behind this defeat. What follows is of great interest because it provides a combination of the two toponyms associated with Calakmul—namely, *Uxte'tuun* (“three stones”) and *Chikunaahb* (“coati pool”) (see Helmke and Kupprat 2016:38–39; Martin 1997:852).

The juxtaposition of these toponyms with the name of Yuhkno'm Head and the insertion of the syllabogram *ta* in between—understood in this case as a locative preposition (Tokovinine 2007:20–21)—led to the interpretation that this segment specified that Yuhkno'm Head was the Kanu'l ruler established at Calakmul. However, as part of more detail examinations of these panels in the storage facilities of the British Museum, it has become clear that the link between the regnal name and the toponyms is not a simple preposition but a conjunctive expression *yi[ta]*, for *yita*. This expression is known to serve as a coordinating conjunction between various human agents who are coactors in an event, such as the pilgrims, who arrive conjointly at Naj Tunich (Stuart 1997:5, Figure 6d), or the retinue with which Lady Six Sky travelled to Naranjo, who are said to *yita-hul* or “co-arrive” (Helmke 2017:121). In a comparable construction, we can note the joint ballgame conducted between the local ruler of La Corona and Yuhkno'm Yich'aak K'ahk'—the Calakmul overlord. As recorded on Element 33 (at C7), this event is recorded as a *yita-pitzij* or “joint-ballgame” (Beliaev et al. 2016:211–215). As part of our analyses, this also has important ramifications for our understanding of the historical record on the hieroglyphic stair of K'an II, because it specifies that Yuhkno'm Head defeated Naranjo with people or forces from Calakmul—the demonymic construction made clear by the agentive prefix in *aj-Chikunaahb* (“calakmuleño”). Therefore, by A.D. 631, there were no claims of the Kanu'l were at Calakmul. Yet there was

a close collaboration with local forces from Calakmul, which eventually did provide a safe haven from which to operate against the Kanu'l king established at Dzibanche, the old seat of power.

636 (Step 1)

The martial themes of the historical narrative continue in the following section, as recorded on Step 1. This is headed by the CR 2 Eb 0 Pop, and it has been recognized as an event in 636 (Grube and Martin 2004:37) (Figure 12). Aside from the date, the core content of the event recorded had remained mostly opaque, until the recent discovery of the carved panels at Xunantunich. Since their discovery in 2016, the details of this conflict have come into sharper focus. The verb that is recorded at the beginning of Step 1 is another Star War verb, which here is followed by a possessive construction, involving the difrasismo *took' pakal* (literally, “flints and shields”) as we have above. Together, these refer to the offensive and defensive martial implements—the weapons of an army. In this case, they are those of *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*, the then reigning Kanu'l king, established at Dzibanche. Given the syntax of Star War verbs, these can be divided into two major categories: either these affect a place and thereby entail a toponym—in which case a subclause follows that is headed by *u-ch'een*, as we have seen above—or alternatively, these are references to more personal defeats, which are followed by the *took' pakal* difrasismo (Zender et al. 2018). On Step 1, this conforms to the second of the two patterns. Consequently, it refers specifically to the defeat of the army of *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*. Credit for this defeat is provided in the subclause that follows, which is headed by another agency expression (*uchabij*) followed by a reference to Yuhkno'm Head, here with what have been understood as the name and title compacted together into a single glyph

block (compare Martin 2017:Figure 8 to Vepretskii 2021, who provides an alternate interpretation of this segment as a bipartite name).

Now that we recognize the splintering of the Kanu'l house and the strife between *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan* and Yuhkno'm Head, the reference to this martial encounter—from which the latter emerged victorious—is much easier to grasp, and its implications are also plainer. However, there are two elements in this passage that have defied coherent interpretation due to erosion in these sections. The first concerns the title, or the reference, that is appended to the regnal name of *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*. It does not appear to render the expected emblem glyph of the Kanu'l kings, in much the same way that he is styled on Panel 3 of Xunantunich. Although faint, it may provide a locative construction, specifying where the defeat took place, perhaps initiated with a *tu* syllabogram, providing the *ti* locative preposition before a locality that is *u-* initial. The second concerns the glyphic segment that is incorporated into the Star War verb. Close inspection reveals that there is a horizontal bar below the halved star at the top, which may provide a numeral. The outline of the element below agrees with the syllabogram *wa*, and the main sign resembles the distinctive eye of the supernatural entity. Together these may spell *5-CHUWAJ-wa*¹⁰, for *Ho' [Yatik] Chuwaaj*, the name of a supernatural entity known from the texts of Naranjo (see Helmke 2019:438–443; Helmke et al. 2010:105–106). This reference may thereby refer to the defeat of this supernatural entity—perhaps serving as a martial tutelary deity of the armed forces of the Kanu'l—although how precisely it was connected to *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan* remains unknown at present. It also remains unlikely, given syntactical parameters, that it serves as an oblique locative reference—to Naranjo, for instance.

Final comments

The hieroglyphic stair of K'an II is, to some extent, a unique monument. Besides the detailed record of troubled decades of the Kanu'l, as well as metanarrative comments on the part of the Caracol narrators, the stair also has its own highly unusual history. In this sense, it is worth noting the ironic parallel between the main theme of the narrative—the splintering of the Kanu'l dynasty—and the subsequent dismantlement and dispersal of the stair itself to so many different sites. Even though the events recorded are presented in a measured manner, we are still far from a complete understanding of the actual events that transpired in the decades between A.D. 618 and 642.

Many key events remain unknown, and crucial issues remain unresolved. Despite the eight decades of fealty that Naranjo showed the Kanu'l, what prompted the apparent repudiation and the resulting antagonisms? We can also wonder which factions of the Kanu'l different courts backed and what consequences the Kanu'l civil war had for polities across the central lowlands. It is precisely these questions that we think lie at the heart of the sudden reversals that we see among former loyal allies, which may also explain

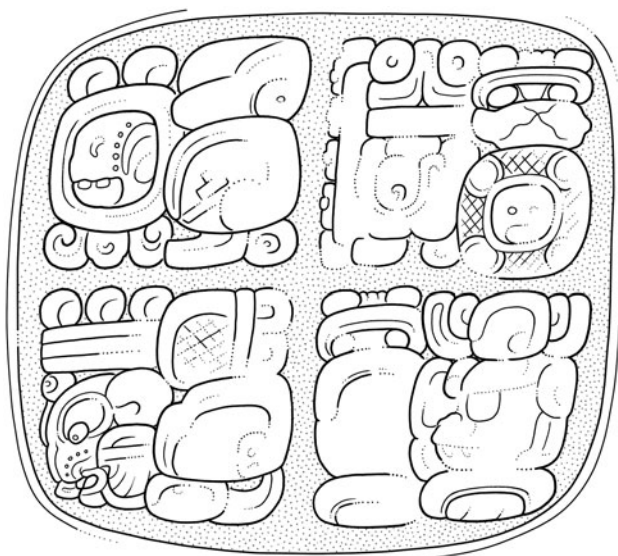


Figure 12. Step 1 (drawing by Helmke).

the marked antagonisms between Naranjo and Caracol (Chase and Chase 1989; Martin and Grube 2000), despite their participation in networks of allegiance involving the Kanu'l kings. In this scenario, Naranjo may have followed a more orthodox tack and backed the established line under *Waxaklajuun Ubaah Chan*, whereas Caracol may have allied itself with Yuhkno'm Head. Although the references on Caracol Stela 3 (D20a & F4a) have often been taken as evidence for a joint military action between the lords of Caracol and Kanu'l in their attack on Naranjo in A.D. 627 and 631 (e.g., Martin and Grube 2000:92), closer scrutiny reveals that this involves yet another actor—one named Yuhkno'm Head *Yopaat*, possibly a military leader of Caracol (Vepretskii 2021). This reference testifies to a wider network of interactions with other agents that have yet to come into sharper focus. And still, at the core of these observations, the query remains as to precisely what prompted the interdynastic strife among the Kanu'l in the first place. All these queries require much further contemplation, and extant monuments need to be examined with greater scrutiny. Without invoking further research, we nonetheless hope for additional finds in the future as sources for prospective studies that will flesh out many of these historical episodes.

Acknowledgments. First and foremost, we would like to thank Sandra Balanzario, Francisco Estrada-Belli, and Erik Velásquez for their kind invitation to present this article at the XIst International Congress of Mayanists, celebrated in June 2019. We thank Simon Martin, David Stuart, Nikolai Grube, and the late Alfonso Lacadena for comments on the text of the grand hieroglyphic stair of K'an II. Thanks to Jaime Awe for inviting the senior author to study the panels discovered at Xunantunich. Also, thanks to Arlen and Diane Chase for their invitation to serve as epigrapher at Caracol and to document the Str. B5 fragment. Thanks to Dmitri Beliaev and to the Atlas Epigráfico de Petén for photographs of the step found at Ucanal. To Quetzal Studios in Cracow, we express our appreciation for the great 3D model of the hieroglyphic stair. Many thanks also to Stephen Houston for permission to reproduce his drawing of Panel 7 at Dos Pilas, and for extensive and perceptive comments on earlier versions of this article. Many sincere thanks to Jago Cooper and Kate Jarvis for facilitating access to the collections of the British Museum, and to Eva Jobbová for help in documenting the panels. Last, but certainly not least, we would like to thank our three anonymous reviewers for their insightful observations and comments, which have greatly benefited our article.

Funding. The research of Sergei Vepretskii was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 18-18-00454, <https://rscf.ru/en/project/18-18-00454/>.

Competing interests. The authors declare no financial or nonfinancial competing interests.

Endnotes

¹ When Panel 3 of Xunantunich was first documented, the regnal name was erroneously transliterated as **18-BAH-ka-KAN**, prompting the transliteration in which the last segment was rendered as *kan* (“snake”) (see Helmke and Awe 2016a:10). This phonetic realization was deemed plausible because the palatization shift of *k > ch* is now known to occur relatively late in lowland Mayan languages (Law et al. 2014). Nevertheless, more detailed study of the original text revealed

no initial phonetic complement. Whereas some ambiguity remains, given our understanding of the phonetics of Classic Mayan in the seventh century, we now prefer to render the logogram as *chan*.

² Or alternatively, as *K'ahk' Xixiw Chan Chaahk*—“*Chaahk* that shreds the sky with fire” (for this reading, see Vepretskii and Davletshin 2021:8, 18).

³ The term and associated concept of “antiking” is relatively new to Maya epigraphy and should be fleshed out further. For relevant sources, in the context of the Tikal–Dos Pilas civil war, see Houston (1993), and more recently, in the context of Dzibanche–Calakmul, see Helmke and Awe (2016b:18). It is based on the comparable “antipope” and used to designate a claimant to the throne who made substantial attempts to take control and rule over a particular royal house. Such antikings were at times supported by important factions, with opposing claimants engaging in armed conflicts, essentially devolving in outright civil wars.

⁴ As observed by Stephen Houston (personal communication 2022), the name of the hieroglyphic stair finds parallels in the names of other monuments—most notably Column Altar 1 at Ek Balam, which is named **SAK-a[ku] ba-li TUN-ni**. Similarly, the turtle altar at the base of the grand hieroglyphic stair at Copan may play into the original name of this monument.

⁵ Assuming that the T1036 logogram may cue a logogram naming a particular kind of bird, it is worth noting the **-ki** syllabogram that occasionally suffixes the logogram, which serves as a phonetic complement. This information, coupled with the known ethnozootaxonomic features involved, might suggest a **XIK** ~ *xik* value for the logogram. Relevant entries in lowland Mayan languages include *xik* in Ch'ol and Tzeltal for “águila, gavián,” otherwise well attested in highland languages and reconstructed as **xihk* in Proto-Mayan (see Kaufman 2003:607).

⁶ This is assuming that the passing of *Yuhkno'm Ti' Chan* around A.D. 622 was left unmentioned in the narrative recorded on the hieroglyphic stair.

⁷ The paired opposites in this instance involve a stingray spine and sign for “blood,” in which the first brings about the second, thereby conveying a sense of totality, sequentiality, and order.

⁸ We initially entertained the idea that this may spell **KAN-a**, which may name a locality as *kan-a'* (“snake-place”), a toponym that is also recorded in other contexts associated with the Kanu'l (Helmke and Kupprat 2016:41, Figure 1e). As to the preceding signs, these involve the same logogram for “blood” seen in the DNIG, stacked atop two other signs. As a result, we also considered the possibility that this may provide a spelling for a complex DNIG involving a paired apposition (see Stuart 2003). Nonetheless, this interpretation is implausible given that the very next glyph on Step 6, which Step 13 adjoins, is precisely such a DNIG.

⁹ The **-a** suffix may either serve to verbalize nominal constructions and thereby form derived intransitives, or it marks the inflection as the active voice of non-CVC transitive verbs. Alternatively, this suffix may be realized as **-aj** and function as a rare agentive, possibly functioning here as a type of epithet, referring to *Tahom' Uk'ab K'ahk'* as the one who has passed away and marking him as a defunct agent in the narrative.

¹⁰ The spelling of this theonym may seem at odds with the pronunciation, given that we may expect to see **-wa-ji** or **-ji** as phonetic complements. As written, this may prompt the dialectal realization *chuwa < *chuwaaj*, in much the same way that we see *yita < *yitaaj*, both of which exhibit the same *a < *aaj* alteration.

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